

VZCZCXRO6915
RR RUEHSL
DE RUEHYE #0424/01 1690533
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 180533Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9201
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000424

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/09/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KJUS](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIAN CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS GLOOMY ON
DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS

YEREVAN 00000424 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: AMB Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b/d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Dr. Philip Gordon met with four of Armenia's civil society leaders to learn their views on the current state of human rights and democratization in Armenia. The leaders offered a gloomy assessment, recounting their experiences with Yerevan's troubled May 31 municipal election and with restrictions on freedom of the press and expression. They also criticized the authorities for not taking human rights seriously, and expressed concern that the international community, including the U.S., was subordinating democracy and human rights to geopolitical considerations. END SUMMARY.

YEREVAN'S TROUBLED MUNICIPAL ELECTION

12. (C) On June 9 EUR A/S Philip Gordon met with Mesrop Movsisan, Director of independent AlPlus online news agency; Amalia Kostanian, Director of Transparency International (TI) in Armenia; Artur Sakunts, Chairman of the Helsinki Citizens Assembly of Vanadzor; and Tigran Khzmalian, Film Director and Member of the Committee on Defense of Political Prisoners in Armenia. The meeting focused on the present state of human rights and democratization in Armenia.

13. (C) A/S Gordon kicked off the discussion with an open question about Yerevan's recent municipal elections. Kostanian reported that she had supervised TI's 50-strong local electoral observation mission and was "shocked" at what she and her observers saw. She said she had expected fraud and intimidation, but had not anticipated the high degree of abuse and harassment of observers and political party proxies. Moreover, she characterized the Prosecutor General's attempts to punish those responsible for the electoral malfeasance as "a sham and a continuation of the abuse."

14. (C) Kostanian also recounted how several observers were forced without warrants to testify about electoral abuse and were subsequently assaulted by law enforcement officers. When one observer objected to the legality of the summons presented to him, officials from the Special Investigative Unit (a body subordinated to the Prosecutor General of Armenia) allegedly dragged him from home and beat him. Kostanian further reported that this individual has now been sentenced to two months' detention for resisting arrest.

WHAT MEDIA FREEDOM?

15. (C) Movsisian told A/S Gordon about the plight of AlPlus, which was banned from operating on television in 2002 and continues to exist only on the internet as an independent online news service. He explained that the GOAM freely flout calls of the international community to allow his news organization to operate, even going so far as to contravene the June 2008 decision of the European Court of Human Rights that awarded AlPlus damages in compensation for the way Armenia's broadcast regulatory authority denied its 2002 application to renew its broadcast license. Movsisian characterized the attitude of those in power as contrary to the ideals of free speech and media. "The authorities believe you are either with us or you are our enemy," he said, "and this applies to the opposition, journalists, artists and the media" alike.

ARMENIA'S AUTHORITIES ARE CRIMINAL

16. (C) All four civil society leaders described the GOAM as "criminal." Khzmalian characterized the recent Yerevan elections as the "consolidation of the coup d'etat," which he claimed began with the assassination of the "criminals' opponents" in the October 1999 parliament assassinations, and continued with the violent crackdown on oppositionists following Armenia's disputed presidential election in 2008. Movsisian characterized the actions of police going after whistleblowers during the election as the regime's attempts to blot out "free and independent thought."

17. (C) In labeling the state "captured," Kostanian noted the intimate relationship between state law enforcement structures such as the police and the SIU, and what she

YEREVAN 00000424 002.3 OF 002

termed "criminal elements" attached to various oligarchs, such as their bodyguards and thug squads. She said that both elements were quite active during the election to ensure a predetermined result. Sakunts argued that the GOAM has a facade that it shows to the international community which masks a ruthless regime that operates entirely by "mafia rules." He said people were helpless to get the authorities to abide by the Constitution because the courts "operate at the direction of the executive." All agreed that the reason they personally were not in jail was because the authorities are weak and require a cadre of critics to speak to Western diplomats and media, so that the regime appears somewhat tolerant of dissent.

WHAT IS THE USG TO DO?

18. (C) When A/S Gordon elicited the group's views on how the USG, in particular the MCC, should react to the current situation, the leaders expressed concern that the international community seemed to be forgetting about human rights and democracy in Armenia, because of the priority it places on Turkey-Armenia negotiations and the Nagorno Karabakh process. They urged that the U.S. remain engaged with civil society and continue to press the GOAM on the importance of democracy and human rights. They agreed that the MCC should terminate the roads project, as this would be "the only message the authorities would understand." Sakunts argued that the money should somehow be diverted to the people in need, circumventing the government structures. Khzmalian pointed out that the idea that MCC's actions should be sensitive to movement on Turkish-Armenian rapprochement or on a potential resolution to the NK conflict is a canard. "The only ones who would benefit from an open Turkish border would be the oligarch criminals and their counterparts on the other side," he claimed.

19. (U) EUR A/S Gordon has (not) approved this cable.

YOVANOVITCH
YOVANOVITCH